Native American Woman Who Survived Trail of Tears May Be Buried at Spence Cemetery

By: Dale C. Maley
For: FairburyNews.Net
Date: July 29, 2024

James Spence (1797-1881) and his wife Susannah Spence (1803-1879) are buried in Spence Cemetery, south of Fairbury. Susannah was part Native American. Her mother, who was a full-blooded Native American, may also be buried in an unmarked grave in Spence Cemetery. Her mother walked the "Trail of Tears."

Wikipedia defines the "Trail of Tears" as an ethnic cleansing and forced displacement of approximately 60,000 people of the "Five Civilized Tribes" between 1830 and 1850 by the United States government. As part of the Indian removal, members of the Cherokee, Muscogee (Creek), Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw nations were forcibly removed from their ancestral homelands in the Southeastern United States to newly designated Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River after the passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830. The Cherokee removal in 1838 (the last forced removal east of the Mississippi) was brought on by the discovery of gold near Dahlonega, Georgia, in 1828, resulting in the Georgia Gold Rush.

Elizabeth Pridmore Aquatake Quatie Rishton was born in the Cherokee Territory of Alabama in 1755. Genealogy researchers disagree on whether Elizabeth was in the Chickasaw or Cherokee tribe. Ancestry.com lists her parents as Joshua Rishton (1730-1837) and Alice Royston (1728-1780). No evidence could be found that either Joshua or Alice were Native American. It is possible that Joshua and Alice Rishton adopted Elizabeth.

Malachi Spence was born in North Carolina in 1769. Later, he and his family would be some of the first white settlers in the Fairbury area.

In 1775, Elizabeth Rishton married John C. "Jack" Callahan in Alabama. Elizabeth and Jack had four children. Jack's parents were Edward "Red Ned" Callahan and Mahala Susanna "White Deer" Unegahiwiya "Sukey" Brock Callahan. Jack's maternal grandparents were both Native Americans.

Courtney A. Hubbard was born in 1779 in Maryland. In 1796, Courtney married Malachi Spence in North Carolina. Malachi was 27, and Courtney was 17 years old when they married. They had nine children. One of the children of Malachi and Courtney Spence was James Spence, born in North Carolina in 1797. The Malachi Spence family moved to Madison County, Kentucky, around 1800.

In 1803, Susannah Rishton Callahan was born in Madison County, KY. Her parents were Jack Callahan and Elizabeth Rishton. If her father, Jack, was 50% Native American and

her mother, Elizabeth, was 100% Native American, Susannah would have been 75% Native American.

Wikipedia recounts that the Battle of Tippecanoe was fought on November 7, 1811, in Battle Ground, Indiana, between American forces led by then Governor William Henry Harrison of the Indiana Territory and Native American forces associated with Shawnee leader Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa (commonly known as "The Prophet"). These two brothers were leaders of a confederacy of various tribes who opposed the European-American settlement of the American frontier. As tensions and violence increased, Governor Harrison marched with an army of about 1,000 men to attack the confederacy's headquarters at Prophetstown, near the confluence of the Tippecanoe River and the Wabash River.

Harrison accomplished his goal of destroying Prophetstown. The win proved decisive and garnered Harrison the nickname of "Tippecanoe ." Meanwhile, the defeat dealt a fatal blow to Tecumseh's confederacy, and though comeback attempts were made, it never fully recovered. Harrison's nickname was so popular that the Whigs turned "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" into the slogan and a popular song for Harrison and his running mate John Tyler's 1840 presidential campaign.

Jack Callahan was killed at the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811. His widow, Elizabeth Callahan, was 56 years old when her husband was killed.

In 1819, James Spence married Susannah Rishton Callahan in Madison County, Kentucky. James was 21, and Susannah was 16 when they married. They had 16 children. Nine of their children were born in Kentucky, and seven were born in Indian Grove Township.

In the 1820 Census, Elizabeth Callahan lived in Madison County, Kentucky. Elizabeth could not be found in the 1830 U.S. Census.

Valentine Darnall was the first white settler in Livingston County in 1830. Two years later, the Malachi Spence family moved from Kentucky to a farm south of Fairbury. Malachi's son, James Spence, also emigrated from Kentucky to Fairbury.

The five tribes were forced to move from the southeast to the Indian Territory west of Arkansas and relocated in different years. In 1831, the Choctaw became the first Nation to be removed, and their removal served as the model for all future relocations. After two wars, many Seminoles were removed in 1832. The Creek removal followed in 1834, the Chickasaw in 1837, and the Cherokee in 1838.

Several written reports from descendants of Elizabeth Callahan suggest that she was forced to march in The Trail of Tears around 1838. Elizabeth would have been 83 years old when she was forced to walk from Georgia to the Indian Territory. Some of her descendants report that she became ill on the trip and stayed at one of her daughter's

homes in Missouri. In the 1840 Census, a person named Elizabeth Callahan lived in Fleming, Kentucky.

It is possible that Elizabeth Callahan then went to live with her daughter, Susannah Spence, who lived south of Fairbury. There are reports that Elizabeth Callahan died in 1850 at the age of 95 and was buried in an unmarked grave in Spence Cemetery, south of Fairbury.

Susannah Spence died in 1879 at the age of 76, and her husband, James Spence, died in 1881 at the age of 83. Both are buried in the Spence Cemetery.

In 1906, Congress passed a law to compensate Cherokee Native Americans forced to leave their homes when the United States broke a treaty. Guion Miller, a special agent of the Interior Department, was tasked with compiling a roll of eligible persons.

The children and grandchildren of Elizabeth Callahan filed several claims with Mr. Miller. These claims stated that Elizabeth was a Native American and was forced to leave her home during the Trail of Tears forced marches. Copies of these claims are still available today.

In 1983, Erma D. Stuckey published a massive book with the histories of the Darnall, Spence, Steers, Spangler, Stuckey, and Sill families. In this book, Erma noted that Susannah Callahan, wife of James Spence, was "part Indian." James and Susannah Spence are buried in Spence Cemetery.

Several questions about Elizabeth Callahan remain unanswered. Who were her Native American parents? Was she born in the Chickasaw or Cherokee tribe? Was she forced to march in the Trail of Tears? Was she buried in an unmarked grave in Spence Cemetery, close to her daughter Susannah Spence?

Some of the many descendants of the James and Susannah Spence family likely still live in the Fairbury area. Since Susannah Spence was part Native American, all of her descendants are genetically part Native American.

Hopefully, someday, more answers will be found about the fascinating life of Elizabeth Pridmore Aquatake Quatie Rishton-Callahan.

The older woman is Elizabeth Callahan, a Native American who may have been forced to march in the Trail of Tears. The younger girl is likely one of her granddaughters.